



**Education for All:** During a lecture on campus, Greg Mortenson explained his commitment to building schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

## Three Cups of Tea Co-author Shares Experience of Building Schools in Pakistan

**G**reg Mortenson, co-author of *Three Cups of Tea* and executive director of the Central Asia Institute, recounted his experiences of building schools in the remote mountain regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan during a packed lecture Sept. 8 at the University of San Francisco.

Part of the Justice Lecture Series, Mortenson's talk drew an overflow crowd that had every seat filled in the McLaren Complex and other attendees crowding onto any available floor space in the aisles and along the walls. Mortenson told the audience that the only way to alleviate poverty is by truly understanding it and then empowering the poor to help themselves.

"To understand poverty, I think we need to smell poverty, we need to taste poverty, we need to touch poverty, we need to be with poverty," Mortenson said. "We can't solve poverty from a think tank in Washington, D.C."

Earlier that day, USF awarded Mortenson an honorary degree during the annual Mass of the Holy Spirit for his work on behalf of the poor and marginalized. Mortenson has spent the past 15 years promoting education, particularly among young girls, by helping to build schools in poor and volatile regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The project, which grew into the Central Asia Institute, has helped establish more than 78 schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan and educate more than 28,000 children, including 18,000 girls, where few educational opportunities existed. Mortenson's emphasis on educating girls stems from a belief (and African proverb) that if "you educate a boy, you educate an individual. Educate a girl, you educate a community."

Educating girls to at least a fifth grade level, Mortenson said, brings three primary benefits to a community: reduced infant mortality, reduced

population explosion, and an improvement in the basic quality of health and life. In turn, these improvements help promote peace.

"If we don't educate these girls, nothing will change," he said.

Mortenson's work has subjected him to an armed kidnapping, a 2003 firefight with Afghan warlords, two fatwas by enraged Islamic mullahs, CIA investigations, and death threats from fellow Americans after September 11 for helping Muslim children to become educated.

"Instead of building walls, we need to build bridges," he said.

Mortenson's devotion to education in Pakistan and Afghanistan began after a failed attempt to climb to the summit of K2, the second highest peak on Earth, after Mount Everest. Mortenson became exhausted, emaciated, and disoriented while coming down the mountain and was taken in and nursed back to health by the Balti people in the remote Pakistani village of Korphe. During his recovery, he learned the village had no school building for its children and made a life-changing promise to a young girl to build one.

Recounted in *Three Cups of Tea*, a *New York Times* No. 1 bestseller for nonfiction and the 2007 Kiriama Prize winner, Mortenson's experience with Korphe tribal elders, philanthropists, Taliban officials, and the mujahideen in Pakistan come to life. The book argues that winning the war against Islamic extremism can best be accomplished by alleviating poverty and improving access to education.

The book's title refers to a Pakistani saying that after sharing one cup of tea, you are a stranger, two cups you're a friend, and three cups makes you family.

*Three Cups of Tea* was the required summer reading for entering USF students this fall. [USF](#)

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